

Reviews

Music

A POP REBEL'S NEW-STYLE SWAGGER

Rina Sawayama breaks stuff and builds back better on her excellent second album

By ROB SHEFFIELD



Rina Sawayama

Hold the Girl

DIRTY HIT

★★★★☆

RINA SAWAYAMA IS everything you could pray for in a pop provocateur, circa 2022: rude, audacious, unpredictable, hilarious, blunt, with a mean streak and an omnivorous ear. The Japanese British art rebel made waves with her full-length debut, *Sawayama*, a pop manifesto with her own queer glam-rock sensibility. In gems like “STFU!,” she managed to combine Y2K-era teen disco and nu metal into a new style of headbanging swagger. Anyone could hear it: Rina Sawayama was born to break stuff.

Her long-awaited *Hold the Girl* is a personal journal – a Saturn-return statement about moving out of her twenties and facing up to her past. It’s smoother ➔

ILLUSTRATION BY
Yuko Shimizu



➔ RINA SAWAYAMA

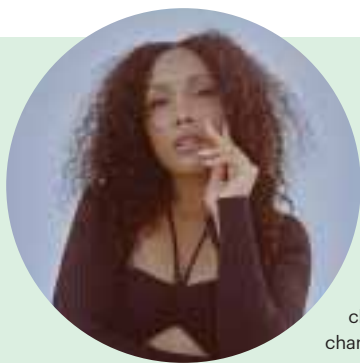
on the surface than *Sawayama*, channeling her twisted visions into straight-ahead pop tunes with arena-ready confidence. The whole album is high on queer bravado. As she belts in the Gaga-style title tune, “Sometimes I get down with guilt/For the promises I’ve broken to my younger self.”

But that younger Rina should be proud, because *Hold the Girl* remains prickly no matter how slick the hooks might get. She delves deep into her troubled childhood, raised by a Japanese single mother in London who didn’t speak English and struggled just to feed them both. Her main songwriting inspiration here is Taylor Swift – like a lot of artists, she got her mind blown by *Folklore* and took it as an invitation to get more into storytelling. As she told ROLLING STONE U.K. last year, “I remember when Taylor Swift released *Folklore*, I was like, ‘This bitch is writing about fake stories, and she just wrote a whole album. If she can do it, I need to do it.’”

“This Hell” sets the tone, lashing out at homophobes with a brash mix of disco and yeehaw country – the intro has synthesized horse neighs and a quote from Shania Twain, declaring “Let’s go, girls!” “Catch Me in the Air” comes to terms with her mother, to clubby beats from Madonna producer Stuart Price. Sawayama is at her weirdest and best when she ramps up the tempo for kinkier sonic twists and turns. “Your Age” is a mix of bhangra and electro-warp sound effects, as she tries to process some early trauma, spitting “You fucked with my life.”

“Frankenstein” is her peak, a high-energy meditation on the strange love between the mad scientist and the monster. She begs for a Dr. Frankenstein to take control of her and rebuild her, until she breaks down in the chant, “I don’t want to be a monster anymore.” “Frankenstein” sums up Sawayama at her musical and emotional extremes – torn between the desire to be beautiful and the need to be free.

She started writing these songs via Zoom with her trustiest collaborators, producer Clarence Clarity and co-writer Lauren Aquilina. But it seems the isolation of lockdown made her bolder about looking inside herself. The most exciting thing about *Hold the Girl* is that you can’t even guess where Sawayama might go next. **R**



NOAH GROWS UP IN PRIVATE

The youngest member of the Cyrus clan finds her voice By MAURA JOHNSTON

NOAH CYRUS opens her debut full-length with a stark lyric: “When I turned 20, I was overcome/With the thought that I might not turn 21,” she murmurs over fingerpicked guitars and whispers of feedback. It’s a grab-you-by-the-throat introduction that is a fitting



Noah Cyrus

The Hardest Part

Columbia

★★★★☆



opening for *The Hardest Part*, a compact yet emotionally resonant collection of Laurel Canyon-recalling pop from the youngest member of the Cyrus clan. Channeling Cyrus’ recent travails, which include the death of her grandmother, her parents’ romantic problems, and her own addiction to and recovery from Xanax, *The Hardest Part* is unflinching yet tender.

That opener, “Noah (Stand Still),” blooms from a white-knuckle description of the anomie caused by the early days of sobriety into a chugging, resolute plea to keep going, with banjo and backing vocals underscoring Cyrus’ message. It’s not a

fairy-tale ending – the wailed bridge closes out with the slightly doomy mantra “Life goes on and on until...” – but it’s determined enough to be a happy one, and it echoes the themes of getting through hard times that abound on the album.

Musically, *The Hardest Part* walks the line between modern acoustic pop and classic country, calling back to Cyrus’ Nashville-steeped upbringing while also being in step with of-the-moment young artists. “I Just Want a Lover” grapples with lockdown angst and the gossip press’s intrusive eye as Cyrus longs for “a lover who’s in love with me, not another liar making love to me” over a darkly hued instrumental that hearkens back to the moody soft rock of the mid-Eighties. “Every Beginning Ends” is another standout, a pedal-steel-accented duet with Death Cab for Cutie frontman Ben Gibbard that’s a solid tear-in-the-beer country ballad. Cyrus’ weathered alto and Gibbard’s Willie Nelson-like croon intertwine as they lament the slow dissolution of a romance with the forlorn vocal melody only illuminating the sadness at the song’s core. And “Loretta’s Song,” which closes the album, is named after Cyrus’ maternal grandmother, Loretta Finley, who died in August 2020, but it’s a gorgeously wrought country-gospel hymn, with Cyrus’ voice in full flower as she leads a choir in celebrating life and the afterlife.

Cyrus has always been in the spotlight, all the way back to appearing on her father Billy Ray’s TV drama, *Doc*, when she was two years old. But *The Hardest Part* is the result of her stepping away and figuring out who she is – and the songs she wrote during that time sound appealing even as they’re digging into knotty, complex emotions. **R**

BREAKING

India Shawn’s Conversationally Chill R&B

LOS ANGELES singer-songwriter India Shawn has been on the margins of R&B success for about a decade, writing for artists like Chris Brown and Monica while also independently releasing her own music that’s rooted in refined intimacy and her unassumingly gorgeous vocals. Now, she’s making her major-label debut, *Before We Go (Deeper)*. Collaborators like singer 6lack, Anderson. Paak, and psych-pop crew Unknown Mortal Orchestra help create a chill vibe, from the airy vulnerability of “Don’t Play With My Heart” to the steely slow burner “Exchange,” making for an LP that flows sweetly from breakups to make-ups and back again. **JON DOLAN**